

VZCZCXRO4131
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0907/01 0851607
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 251607Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6443
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000907

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2018
TAGS: [IZ](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: VISIT TO MAKHMOUR REFUGEE CAMP

REF: A. (A) BAGHDAD 167
[1](#)B. (B) BAGHDAD 317
[1](#)C. (C) ANKARA 132
[1](#)D. (D) ANKARA 158
[1](#)E. (E) ANKARA 320

Classified By: PolCouns Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) MNF-I coordinated a March 8 visit for senior UNAMI, Embassy, and PRT Ninewa officials to the UNHCR refugee camp in Makhmour, Ninewa Province. Refugee representatives at the camp said the residents unanimously want to return to Turkey. Local Kurdish Iraqi officials said the camp and its residents could represent an "excuse" for Turkey to launch attacks against the Kurdish Regional Government. UN officials praised the local Iraqi government's provision of essential services to the camp's residents, although residents said they still need more assistance. A tour of the camp revealed the village's living conditions at least on par with surrounding Iraqi towns.

UNHCR Provides Background

[1](#)2. (C) In a UN/USG meeting at a joint Iraqi Army-Coalition Forces base in the town of Makhmour, chaired by MNF-I MG Bergner and with the participation of Third Armored Cavalry Regiment COL Bills, UNHCR representative Charles Lynch-Staunton provided a background on UNHCR's involvement with the Makhmour refugee camp and its current activities. The USG participants expressed their hope that the visit could be one step in what will be an involved process toward a long-term solution in closing the camp.

[1](#)3. (C) Lynch-Staunton said that following the February cross-border Turkish military activities, the 30 Iraqi Police officers guarding the camp have been replaced with more than 40 Iraqi Security Forces to provide internal and perimeter security. The initial force of Iraqi Police had been assigned to the camp following the 2006 combined weapons search of the camp conducted by MNF-I and the Iraqi Security Forces, with UNHCR assistance.

[1](#)4. (C) UNHCR has a current budget of about USD 650,000 according to Lynch-Staunton. He said the organization does home repair, garbage collection, care and maintenance of camp structures, and provision of meals and generators. The UNHCR has special services for vulnerable populations; supplies equipment and medicine for the health clinic; provides salary incentives for camp guards and management; provides monetary assistance for camp residents to attend a local university; and manages the construction of new classrooms.

Refugees Want to Return to Turkey

[1](#)5. (C) In a second meeting with senior UN and USG officials

at the Makhmour camp, local Iraqi and refugee leaders described their aspirations for the camp. That second meeting was attended by UNHCR's Lynch-Staunton; Karen Sasahara, U.S. Embassy Deputy Political/Military Counselor; Siddharth Chatterjee, UNAMI Chief of Staff; Jason Hyland, PRT Ninewa Leader; Michael Hankey, PRT Ninewa ECON; John Mansell, UNAMI military operations; Mark Rutgers, UNAMI; Barzan Saeed Koka, Acting Makhmour Mayor; Ahmed Dzayee, Makhmour camp manager; Major Ahmed, Makhmour IP chief, Haji; outgoing camp resident council chair; Abdulkarim, incoming camp council chair; and Mohamed, camp council member and middle school director.

¶16. (C) Chairman Haji said that that all the refugees want to return to Turkey. Lynch-Staunton said in the earlier meeting that camp residents have given him the same message. The UNHCR representative said there is a consensus that the residents want a general amnesty, international guarantees of protection, compensation for property left behind when they fled Turkey and a complete restoration of "Kurdish Rights" within Turkey, points echoed by refugee representatives in the separate meeting. Lynch-Staunton emphasized that UNHCR will not engage in discussions on closing the camp until a "durable solution" for the residents is agreed upon by all parties.

Local KDP Wants Refugees Resettled Elsewhere

¶17. (C) Mayor Barzan (Kurdish Democratic Party) said a political agreement is needed to resolve the camp's status, with all parties involved in the discussion on the status of the camp following the law and avoiding violence or military action. The Mayor placed the camp in the context of the

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political maneuvering among the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the GOI and the GOT. He stated that Turkey is an important neighbor, with which the KRG wants good relations. He said the KRG wants to avoid "unfortunate" military action like the GOT cross-border actions in northern Iraq in February, which he said inflamed KRG-GOT tensions and caused economic problems for the Kurds. Military actions like those in February make the KRG "think twice" about admitting the refugees into the KRG, since the KRG would not want the GOT to use the camp or refugees as an excuse to attack the KRG. He said third-country resettlement is the best solution for the camp residents.

Essential Services are Good, but Could be Improved

¶18. (C) Meeting participants also discussed the provision of essential services at the camp. The GoI has only provided the camp with a budget for services since 2006; prior to that the KRG funded the camp out of its own budget, said Mayor Barzan. Resident Committee Chairman Haji also acknowledged good assistance from the UN on service delivery but said the camp still needs more. UNAMI's Siddharth Chatterjee stated that he was impressed with and appreciative of the assistance of UNHCR and the Makhmour mayor regarding service delivery at the camp.

¶19. (C) During a tour of the camp, Refcoord noted that - other than the guards posted at the front gate and the UNHCR flags - the camp has the appearance of a small Iraqi village. The camp has homes that have the same appearance as many of those in the nearby towns and villages. There are cafes, internet cafes, stores, repair shops, and other facilities one would expect to find in a moderate-sized village. People appeared well-fed, well-clothed and healthy; the residents openly greeted visitors and went on with their day-to-day work. Schooling is available to all children; classrooms appear well-organized and orderly, children were spontaneous and engaging in the classes. There is a health clinic in the

camp but residents complained specifically that it was difficult to obtain long-term treatment for some forms of cancer. Many adult males work as day laborers on the local economy; others are engaged in longer-term employment in local factories, many in the KRG province of Erbil. Although the camp has the semblance of a perimeter fence, this fencing does not appear impenetrable. Camp residents did not have major complaints about camp life but universally expressed a desire to return to Turkey.

Refugees Want a U.S. Role vis--vis GOT

¶10. (C) Chairman Haji said he wants Coalition Forces, in particular the U.S., to "solve" the Makhmour camp situation. He sees the inability of Turkish Kurdish refugees in Iraq to return home in safety as a symbol of the challenges facing the Kurdish nation across the region. He asked for the U.S. to defend Kurds when they are "mistreated" by Turks. Further, he suggested that the GoT should utilize the Kurdish members of the GoT Parliament to find a peaceful solution. He said, "The time has come for Turkey to apologize, say they have done something wrong." He said the GoT has wrongly stated that the refugees are terrorists.

Comment

¶11. (C) Political resolution of the Makhmour refugee camp and its residents' status appears to be the desire and preferred solution of residents and refugees in Makhmour. This most recent USG visit reinforces the findings of earlier tours of the camp and meetings with local officials: conditions for the refugees at the camp are good, and the refugees desire to return to Turkey. Nothing at the camp or in the local Iraqi government would appear to stand in the way of an international decision to do so, if such an agreement is reached among the GOI, GOT and UNHCR. The first step would be a new UNHCR census of the camp residents and reconfirmation of the civilian nature of the camp. UNHCR officials are also the best-placed to ascertain the true wishes of the camp residents. While we do not doubt that the majority want to return, we suspect that some residents may have a significantly lower threshold for return compared to the Committee members who represent more or less Kurdish nationalist thinking. We also note that Camp committee members advocated return to Turkey "under international protection," an indication that confidence-building will be a major task in order to bring all parties (the GOI, GOT, KRG, and the camp residents) to work together on this issue.

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